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CONSULTANT'S REPORT:  
ON THE INCORPORATION OF LAND TENURE PROBLEMS  
IN A RESEARCH PROGRAMME  
IN THE ADA DISTRICT\*\*

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June, 1974

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CONSULTANT'S REPORT: On the incorporation of land tenure problems in a research programme in the ADA District.

June 4-18, in Ethiopia: Report Written in Nairobi

Kenneth H. Parsons

I. General Perspective

- (1) The research being undertaken in the African Rural Employment Research Network is directed to the study of policy alternatives open to agricultural development taking account of the alternative strategies of development upon farm output, employment, income distribution and migration.

The ADA is a project in development stimulation and assistance through the combination of providing social overhead facilities: farm to market roads, community water supplies, community warehousing and market organization; with a minimum package program of fertilizer, improved seeds and extension advice, implemented by a loan program. The credit is to be extended through local groups of farmers formed for this purpose to which prospective borrowers are admitted by their neighbors as being credit-worthy. Extensive defaults on loans made will disqualify the local group for future loans. Each borrower is required to have two guarantors; where the borrowers are tenants, something of a model lease is required, in written form. Loans are limited to small farmers, including the tenants of landlords owning 10 hectares or less.

The whole ADA program is considered to be an experiment in rural development which may be sufficiently effective to provide a model which might be generalized for the whole country--or at least to Southern Ethiopia.

The ADA project was deliberately sited in a high-tenancy area and one of the major objects is to assist in the improvement of landlord/tenant relationships.

(2) I have the impression that the general thinking about land reform at the time the ADA project was formulated was to place central emphasis upon improving the security and equitability of tenancies in Ethiopian agriculture.

It seems, however, that the thinking about land reform has, in recent months, taken on a wider perspective. In a recent Radio-TV interview, (published in the Ethiopian Herald for June 18, 1974) the Prime Minister commenting on the land policies of his government observed:

"Government land grants will be made only to those who shall make their living by working the land."

"Secondly, the government is to undertake settlement schemes which are also designed to solve the country's unemployment problem."

"Thirdly, land ownership in excess of what is considered to be a reasonable limit of the owner's capacity to develop, will be taken over by the government and will be distributed to those who will make their livelihood by working on the land."

"The government is also to regulate the relationship between tenants and landlords on an equitable basis."

In a visit with the Minister of Land Reform and Administration, H.E. Mr. Bellete, June 13, the Minister reported that the current emphasis in the program of the Ministry was to distribute publicly-owned lands to small farmers, in tracts of 5 ha. (as I recall); this is significant in that it appears to mark the end of a policy running back to the consolidation of the Empire almost a century ago, of making land grants to persons considered to deserve rewards for service to the state, including military and civil servants. Grants to the latter were considered to be something of a substitute for a retirement income pay system for public servants.

My impression is that the exact shape of future land policies and land reform programs is yet to be determined; however, my impression is also that there is a growing volume of discussion of and even agitation for "land for the tiller" type of land reform, or distribution, as was implied, or could be implied, in the points made by the Prime Minister, quoted above.

- (3) The specific request to this consultant was that he should "point out how we should incorporate land tenure problems in the five-year research program."

Considering the central role which land policy, land reform and land tenure issues now hold in the discussions of agricultural development policy in Ethiopia, it would seem essential that the tenure status of the participants in the ADA project be carefully ascertained and that this classification should be a major basis for grouping participants in the analysis.

Since the ADA project is intended to serve as a pilot project in the expectation that it might serve as a model for generalization for the Highland area, at least of southern Ethiopia, it would also seem essential that the participation in and functioning of the ADA project be understood against the characteristics of the surrounding community (or communities): those who are not qualified to participate--as the landlords and their tenants holding more than 10 hectares of land; persons who may have applied for loans but were rejected by the local committee of farmers as not being credit-worthy; and the variation in customary tenure practices, i.e., the degree of uniformity of tenure practices--including landlord/tenant relations, which could be compared with other areas in Ethiopia; since a central interest of both the ADA project and the research program of the African Rural Employment Network is to take careful account of both

employment generation through agricultural development and migration, it would seem useful to take account of the existence and potentialities for part-time farming, through which employment in agriculture and in non-agricultural pursuits (traditional and modern) is combined. This aspect of the research would, in effect, consider agricultural development as an integral part of rural development. Research on some of these wider issues might need to be undertaken in projects supplementary to the research now planned by MSU-IDR.

## II. Tenure Status of Participants in ADA Project; Differential Gains

- (4) Participants in the ADA project, at least those participating in the agricultural credit program, are limited to small farmers, with small farmers defined as being those with farms of 10 hectares or less. Thus, this means that the participants will be either small owner-farmers, or tenants on landlord holdings of 10 hectares or less.
- (5) Presumably, the system of farming, cropping practices, etc., will be analyzed for all sample farm firms so that innovations in farming practices as a consequence of participation in the ADA project, can be identified; such a comparison would require either comparable scheduled interviews with a sample of comparable non-participants, or historical case studies for the participants.
- (6) Although the above comparisons, for participants of different tenure status would presumably provide the basic ground for ascertaining the significance of the tenure status for participation, it would seem advisable that special attention should be given to innovators. One would guess, in anticipation of the analysis, that the leadership in innovations would be found among the owner-operators and the landlords renting out less than 10 hectares of land--for we have the impression

that these small landlords are also likely to be working farmers, or entrepreneurs.

The social characteristics and personal histories of the innovating farmers, whoever they may be, should likely be studied carefully, for it is likely that the dynamics of agricultural development are to be found in the personal qualifications and tenure histories of the innovating farmers, with the system of farming being only the outcome of these personal qualities in relation to the structure of opportunities rather than the determinant of progress.

- (7) Quite obviously, the analysis of the loan repayment experience, and the identification of defaulters, will be an essential part of the study. Again, it will be interesting and probably significant, to correlate the experience with repayments with both the effectiveness with which modern inputs are used (cost and returns comparisons) with the tenure status and personal characteristics of the borrowers.

### III. Tenure Status and Correlative Social Characteristics of Non-Participants in the ADA Project Area.

- (8) Although the program of the ADA project is designed to give support to small farmers, the means used to stimulate agricultural development are as likely, or more likely, to be valuable to larger farmers also.

Thus, the means to increase production--the minimum package of modern inputs--and especially mechanization, may be more fully and more effectively adapted by the large farmers than by the small farmers eligible to participate in the program of the project.

Especially should careful inquiry be made about the extent to which large land owners have recently shifted from a tenancy system of land use to a contract-type of modernized farming, or even direct large-scale farming under their own direction. Such a substitution of mechanization

for small-scale tenancies, would presumably have been encouraged also by the long discussions of land reform, through giving tenants security of occupancy, and immunity against eviction after 5 years of tenant occupancy of land.

Our impressions are that the evictions of tenants already made by large land owners, with a shift to large-scale mechanized farming--thus reducing employment on large farms--has been a factor in the increasing agitation for "land to the tiller" programs, through the acquisition and distribution of land now in big ownership units.

Also, in the recent radio-TV interview of the Prime Minister, quoted above, there was an indication that a policy was under consideration for the acquisition and distribution of excess areas of large holdings. Although the Prime Minister used the phrase land "in excess of a reasonable limit of the owner's capacity to develop the land," the more general concept would seem to be that of the amount of retained area that would be required to provide a reasonably efficient large-scale operating unit.

(9) The non-successful applicants for loans.

It would seem especially valuable to know the tenure status and personal qualifications of applicants not found acceptable as prospective farmer-borrowers. It would seem that the basis of exclusion of prospective borrowers could be of considerable significance--in that this would represent farmers who (seemingly) in their own estimate were qualified to participate but whose neighbors disagreed.

One aspect of this ascertainment of the grounds for rejection might be to relate this to the indigenous and largely kinship grouping of farmers so prevalent in tropical Africa.

(10) In terms of the potential for rural development through emphasis upon agricultural development by means of minimum-package programs for small farmers, it would seem useful to have something of a community inventory of the labor force in the community, especially the landless workers heretofore dependent upon agricultural employment.

(11) Finally, it would be interesting and probably significant, to have an inventory--including tenure status and general characteristics of the farmers in the communities who were eligible for participation in the ADA-MPP credit-loan program, but chose not to do so. Why?

#### IV. Some Background Issues

(12) Agricultural development as a transformation of traditional agriculture.

We would emphasize the potential value of viewing agricultural development as a problem in transforming an antecedent traditional agriculture. This would seem to require that at least three different aspects of the transformation process be taken into account. One is the problem of increasing man's physical control over nature--through science, technology, physical capital--which is popularized today as the Green Revolution. The second aspect is that of increasing the willingness and effectiveness of man's participation in development; this has at least two differentiable traits, (a) the transformation of the traditional institutional structure--of which the land tenure system is a dominant part in traditional agriculture and (b) the creation of the improved abilities to cope with both new institutional forms and the new techniques for increasing man's control over physical nature. One main aspect of these awakened and enhanced abilities is the realization by farmers that they can do something to improve their life by their own efforts. In the fatalism and resignation found among the poorer traditional farmers, we would find a recognition to large degree as John Stuart Mill remarked

about Irish colliers in his Principles of Political Economy (approximately) "that they are in a situation where they can do nothing on their own to make their lives any better or any worse."

To focus on the transformation of the traditional tenure system as an aspect of development, ideally research would identify the relevant land holding, land using, and inheritance practices and then establish their potentialities for inclusion in a modified system of rules and practices--a set of rules designed to serve more general purposes than the traditional tenure systems provide for.

(13) The role of government in the modernization of traditional tenure systems.

The traditional tenure systems in tropical Africa (as everywhere else), antedate the state. There are in general two distinguishable aspects of such a system: one is the manner in which people using and occupying land, distinguish "mine" from "thine." The basic principle here is the one articulated by John Locke, that property in land is achieved by "mixing one's labor with the soil and appropriating it from the state of nature." Characteristically, this type of equitable claim to a tract of land, assures the user an inheritable usufructory claim to land use and occupancy.

The other aspect of the tenure system is the vesting of the authority to allocate opportunities to occupy and use land (and thus the possibility of acquiring inheritable usufructory ownership rights) in the authoritative head (or council) of the land-owning group (family, clan, or community). This aspect of the ownership of land is realized by "right of conquest." In tribal Africa, a particular tribe claimed a territory by conquering an area and holding it by force. The authorized "mixing of one's labor with the soil" to acquire a usufructory title to particular

tracts of land functioned, and still functions over much of tropical Africa within the limits set by the "authoritative" allocation to individuals and families of the opportunity to occupy and use land.

It is through the exercise of authority claimed by right of conquest, that the basic role government is established in reshaping and sustaining a systematic set of rules for the use, occupancy and transmission of rights to land. From this root or base there has developed the great "public" powers over land--taxation, eminent domain and the police powers. Also, property rights are sanctioned and made valuable by the order created by the sanctions of sovereignty. There is always a problem of reconciling and integrating these two aspects of a tenure system--that of the "authoritative allocation" and the "authorized use and occupancy of land." Such a reconciliation and integration is always unique to a degree to each time and place; thus, the heritage of Ethiopia has its own particular forms and reactions.

As nearly as I have been able to sense the significance of the local tenure history of southern Ethiopia and the ADA area in particular the process of integration and reconciliation of these two (theoretical) aspects of tenure, is to be traced back to the time of the consolidation of the Empire, about a century ago, and the incorporation of southern Ethiopia into the nation of Ethiopia.

It is clear that substantial grants of land were made to administrators etc., with such grants intended to ensure the consolidation of the state. It is from such grants that the current larger absentee holdings of land were established. Subsequently, the public domain was sorted out roughly from the granted lands and there followed a policy almost to the present of making awards to persons in the form of warrants for areas of land. It is the termination of this practice which the Prime Minister announced

in the above quoted interview, with grants henceforth only to bona fide farmers--in tracts of 5 hectares or less. In the U.S., our land policy followed a similar pattern of extensive grants of land to subsidize the building of railroads--with an eventual reduction of grants to homesteaders only.

I mention these theoretical issues because it seems to me from my brief inquiries that there is still a great deal of ambiguity and uncertainty about who owns what in southern Ethiopia.

For one thing, one senses that the traditional tenure system in southern Ethiopia, at the time of national unification was itself not very systematic. This lack of form seems, in turn, to be attributable partly to the long history of local wars and devastation in this part of Ethiopia and partly to the historic fact that many of the people were nomadic and did not in fact "mix their labor with the soil as do cultivators."

There is seemingly also a considerable degree of vagueness about what land is in fact public domain--especially unoccupied public domain. The procedural rule by which public domain is identified is that no one pays taxes on the land--which is the way traditional cultivators acquire the status of owner-cultivators.

Perhaps these remarks may suggest the main point I would make here--namely that one aspect of the research in the ADA development project area that would need to be checked as a condition precedent to generalization of the findings to other areas is that somehow the generic characteristics of the tenure system should be understood.

It seems clear enough that there has developed a landlord-tenant system on the larger holdings of land (originally large land grants--now largely absentee owned) with a set of reciprocal privileges and duties or provisions between landlord and tenant. There are also evidently a

substantial number of owner-cultivators; how the ownership of these lands was acquired could be a significant question.

(It could be useful, as a mode of research, to call together a seminar of interested and informed people--especially lawyers, agricultural economists and anthropologists--for a serious discussion of the state of the tenure system in southern Ethiopia. Allan Hoben has some promising ideas about such a seminar.)

It could be that the information about the actual state of land ownership and tenure in this part of Ethiopia is so imprecise, that divergent and partial interpretations of the actual state of affairs is fueling diverse views on the land tenure reform which are on a collision course.

(14) Agricultural development, part-time farming and rural development.

One of the views that is gaining adherents in the study of the development of less developed areas of the world is that (a) while there is likely to be a major increase in rural population, (b) there is little likelihood that, say, twice as many people as at present who can find economic opportunities in agriculture, even a greatly improved agriculture. Also it is increasingly clear that the cities in the developing countries cannot absorb and provide employment opportunities for a vast horde of people drifting in from the countryside. When to this is added the realization frequently expressed by President McNamara, of the World Bank, that the programs of the World Bank, and other "aid" programs had done little or nothing for the poorer forty-percent and the rural people, there is a basis for a "new look" at rural development.

The combination of such conclusions is directing attention to rural development--to integrated rural development--as a prospective means of dealing with the order of issues just noted. Part-time farming has been the means chosen voluntarily by millions of the plain people in Europe,

the U.S.A., and Japan. In this mode of economy, people combine employment in agriculture with non-agricultural employment--in effect occupying economic opportunities in both agriculture and industry concurrently while remaining in the countryside.

One of the aspects of this problem which could probably be studied effectively now in Ethiopia is to analyze the present and the recent volume and kinds of traditional non-farm employment engaged in by farm people--the various crafts, etc.

One of the assumptions or premises of contemporary approaches to agricultural development, is that if labor is made redundant by the new technology that it can, or should, do something else. Although this is no doubt a valid long-term view, the short-run consequences can be socially devastating. A complementary or correlative view regarding the traditional handicrafts is that they too should be modernized--which historically has been through the shifting of employment to factory-type establishments.

The suggestion for research on the composition of total employment in a rural community in Ethiopia, is made with the thought that it may be possible to devise ways to increase employment in non-agricultural pursuits in rural areas--at least to tide humanity over the next two or three decades. It is quite likely, I would guess, that the volume of migration from rural areas comes as much from the decline of employment in the traditional crafts as it does from the displacement of people in agriculture by modernization. One of the interesting statistics in David Norman's paper--African Rural Development Paper No. 4--is that for the three villages' studies, 37% of all employment for farm families in these villages was in non-farm occupations--of which 83% was in traditional forms of non-farm employment (Table 3, p. 11).

This suggests that if it were possible to undertake simultaneously a process of industrial-type development, building on the traditional crafts and a process of agricultural modernization which transforms and modernizes traditional agriculture, that the descent into poverty by rural people could be checked, without extensive migration. In effect this would seem to require some degree of priority in tenure policy to assure each rural family some sort of minimum subsistence household--(homesite and garden spot). If this could be achieved, by continuing, at least partially, subsistence household units, then the modernization of agriculture could proceed by using land not needed for locally consumed food crops, i.e., by land surplus to the rural subsistence economy; and by the utilization of labor, surplus to the handicraft economy as well as agriculture. Thus, a three-part kind of rural economy could be envisaged: (a) subsistence households based on part-time farming, (b) a modernizing agriculture and (c) employment generating local industry--if only a more skilled kind of traditional handicrafts. This is, in effect, the outcome of the revolutionary approach to agricultural development in China (Aziz, International Development Review of a few months ago). There the village people continue to live in their own houses and tend to their own gardens--while the collectivization proceeds on the surplus land and by the utilization of surplus labor.

In terms of tenure policy, this would mean that efforts be made to avoid landlessness among rural people--rather the policy would be to provide homesites and garden sites to local people. If this policy was combined with programs for bringing amenities and public services to the rural areas, it might be possible to actually do something effective for the poorer 40% of rural people about whom the head of the World Bank expresses continued concern.

APPENDIX

List of persons with whom I held conferences in Ethiopia (with most of them, several conferences).

1. At the Institute for Development Research:

Dr. Assefa Mchreta  
Dr. Tesfai Tiele  
Mr. Jerry Gill

2. At ADA, Mr. Haileleul Getahun, with one afternoon with the entire staff of the project.

3. Dr. Nils Isaksson, Director, Office of EPID, Extension, Project Implementation Department.

4. Mr. H. E. Bellete Gabre Isadick, Ministry of Land Reform and Administration.

5. At Planning Commission:

Dr. James Gsering  
Mr. Ato Tekola Dejene  
Mr. Mulugila Taye

6. Mr. James Bruce, Ministry of Land Reform and Administration.

7. Professor Allan Hoben, African Studies, Boston University.

8. At USAID Mission:

Mr. Gaylord Walker, Director, Rural Development Division  
Mr. Allan Sudholdt